

**EXAMINING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF FRESHMAN  
ACADEMY AT A MIDDLE TENNESSEE HIGH SCHOOL**

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Examining the Effectiveness of Freshman  
Academy at a Middle Tennessee High School

A Field Study Report

Present to

The College of Graduate Studies

Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Education Specialist

Sherrie Marie Woods

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate my field study to my family. To my husband, Chris Woods, you are the smartest person I have ever known. Through 15 years we have only grown closer. Thanks for playing Mr. Mom so I could get this finished. To my daughters, Addison, Kayleigh and Maycee, you are my inspiration. Your smiles brighten the whole world. You are my greatest accomplishments. I hope I have passed to you the desire to learn and the wisdom to value an education. To my mom thanks for instilling in me the confidence I needed to persevere and always telling me you believed in me. To my dad, thanks for proving to me that one can overcome anything. I am so proud of who you have become.

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## ABSTRACT

SHERRIE MARIE WOODS. Examining the Effectiveness of Freshman Academy at a Middle Tennessee High School (under the direction of Dr. GARY STEWART).

This study analyzed Freshman Academy at a Middle Tennessee high school. The purpose of this study was to explore the effectiveness of Freshman Academy as an intervention program so leaders can determine if the resources being spent on the Freshman Academy in the county have positively impacted the areas of student achievement, attendance, and discipline as measured by attendance rates, numbers of discipline referrals, and numbers of students retained for male and female students of both the majority race and minority races enrolled in the program their first year of high school. Chi-square analysis was used to analyze promotion/retention rates discipline at the .05 level of significance. T-tests were used to analyze attendance at the .01 level of significance.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **Statement of the Problem**

Since the institution of the No Child Left Behind Act, school systems nation-wide have been seeking researched-based programs to boost student achievement and graduation rates. One such program is a Freshman Academy, a form of small learning community, in which interdisciplinary teams of ninth grade teachers share the same students and meet at least once a week, usually through common planning times (Letgers & Kerr, 2001). The United States Department of Education (2007) found that most freshman academies have teams of educators made up of teachers specifically from English, math, science, and social studies, who collaborate and share the same students. They also reported that 90 percent of schools with freshman academies have a wing or separate house in the school, and students take an average of 73 percent of their classes in the academy. Students, upon entering their freshman year, usually experience a transition, which is not a new discovery. Gruhn and Douglass (1947) found that the primary reason for creating middle schools was to assist in the transition to high school. In addition, Alexander (1995), chairman of the Department of Education at George Peabody College, mentioned in his speech delivered at Cornell University in 1963, that there should be a school uniquely designed for the needs of students too old for elementary school and too young for high school. Alexander reveals that after his speech, the number of middle schools in the nation went from around 2,000 to 12,000 in thirty years (1995).

According to Letgers and Kerr (2001) and Peasant (2006), the need for a transition today may stem partly from the lack of support in high school as compared with

elementary and middle school. Just as students need guidance when they transition from elementary school to middle school, they also require guidance when making the transition from middle school to high school. Both sources also agree that high school possesses a more relaxed atmosphere and increased freedoms, while also providing more rigorous classes and a decrease in the nurturing experienced in the lower levels of education.

The Tennessee high school that the data were retrieved from conducted thorough research into developing a Freshman Academy. A Good To Great Team was developed at the pilot school, a Middle Tennessee high school, for this research. Through campus visitations and studies on implemented programs and data, the committee found that the program in other districts benefited students in areas such as, but not limited to, achievement, discipline, and attendance. Based on their research of academies from multiple counties, they developed a program of their own. Data has been collected from students who have completed the freshman year in an academy at the Middle Tennessee High School, and this data needs to be reviewed to determine whether the program has been beneficial to its students.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the effectiveness of Freshman Academy at a Middle Tennessee high school as an intervention program so leaders can determine if the resources being spent on the Freshman Academy in the county have positively impacted the areas of student achievement, attendance, and discipline as measured by attendance rates, numbers of discipline referrals, and numbers of students retained for male and female students enrolled in the program their first year of high school. The

research can also be used to determine if a difference exists between minorities and Caucasian students in terms of promotion or retention, attendance rates, or the number of discipline referrals.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of the study will be to assist leaders in making decisions on the structure of the Freshman Academy already in place. The analysis of the data can assist the county in determining if the program needs to be altered to fit the needs of the students it serves.

### **Research Questions**

1. Is there a significant difference in the promotion/retention rates of first time 9<sup>th</sup> graders at the Middle Tennessee high school after the implementation of Freshman Academy as compared to before the implementation of Freshman Academy in terms of gender and ethnicity?
2. Is there a significant difference in attendance rates of first time 9<sup>th</sup> graders at a Middle Tennessee high school after the implementation of Freshman Academy as compared to before the implementation of Freshman Academy in terms of gender and ethnicity?
3. Is there a significant difference in the number of discipline referrals of first time 9<sup>th</sup> graders at a Middle Tennessee high school after the implementation of Freshman Academy as compared to before the implementation of Freshman Academy in terms of gender and ethnicity?

### **Null Hypotheses**

1. There will be no statistically significant difference in the promotion/retention rates of first time 9<sup>th</sup> graders at a Middle Tennessee high school after the

implementation of Freshman Academy as compared to before the implementation of Freshman Academy?

2. There will be no statistically significant difference in the promotion/retention rates of first time 9<sup>th</sup> graders at a Middle Tennessee high school after the implementation of Freshman Academy as compared to before the implementation of Freshman Academy in terms of gender?
3. There will be no statistically significant difference in the promotion/retention rates of first time 9<sup>th</sup> graders at a Middle Tennessee high school after the implementation of Freshman Academy as compared to before the implementation of Freshman Academy in terms of ethnicity?
4. There will be no statistically significant difference in attendance rates of first time 9<sup>th</sup> graders at a Middle Tennessee high school after the implementation of Freshman Academy as compared to before the implementation of Freshman Academy?
5. There will be no statistically significant difference in attendance rates of first time 9<sup>th</sup> graders at a Middle Tennessee high school after the implementation of Freshman Academy as compared to before the implementation of Freshman Academy in terms of gender?
6. There will be no statistically significant difference in attendance rates of first time 9<sup>th</sup> graders at a Middle Tennessee high school after the implementation of Freshman Academy as compared to before the implementation of Freshman Academy in terms of ethnicity?

7. There will be no statistically significant difference in the number of discipline referrals of first time 9<sup>th</sup> graders at a Middle Tennessee high school after the implementation of Freshman Academy as compared to before the implementation of Freshman Academy?
8. There will be no statistically significant difference in the number of discipline referrals of first time 9<sup>th</sup> graders at a Middle Tennessee high school after the implementation of Freshman Academy as compared to before the implementation of Freshman Academy in terms of gender?
9. There will be no statistically significant difference in the number of discipline referrals of first time 9<sup>th</sup> graders at a Middle Tennessee high school after the implementation of Freshman Academy as compared to before the implementation of Freshman Academy in terms of ethnicity?

### **Limitations**

Many factors contribute to student academic achievement and attendance. Often, there are uncontrollable and unpredictable situations that will positively or negatively affect a student. Limitations of the study include several factors.

1. Attendance, illness, family death, and deployment are uncontrollable issues that may influence data.
2. Researcher cannot control for other program implementation. Other programs were also implemented at the time of the implementation of Freshman Academy. Bridges, for instance, is a program to assist “at-risk” students during the summer before their ninth-grade year.
3. The researcher teaches at the school at which the research will be conducted.

## **Assumptions**

For the purposes of this study, unless otherwise stated, it is assumed that all teachers are highly qualified and are competent and certified to teach their subject areas. It is also assumed that all teachers conducted themselves in an ethical manner. All data retrieved from central office are assumed to be accurate. Any and all reported results will be assumed to be accurate and true. In addition, it will be assumed that all successes reported are due to Freshman Academy and not other programs implemented unless otherwise stated.

## **Definitions of Terms**

1. Freshman Academy- refers to small learning communities designed to assist freshman students transition to high school. Ninth grade students are placed with a team of teachers in a separate wing of the school. This helps to create an environment to offer support for individual student needs.
2. Graduation Rate- the percentage of students from ninth grade who graduate from high school within the district. Districts may also include students with alternative placement programs. There is usually a time limit, such as 4 years, and one summer, attached to the requirements. Graduation rates are addressed in the No Child Left Behind Act. Therefore, school systems are attempting to find programs to increase their graduation rates.
3. Small Learning Community- a community of students and teachers, usually in a large school, the administration divides the students into smaller groups for the purpose of creating an environment similar to a small school. This helps give

students the support from teachers and peers, which is more easily accomplished in a smaller setting.

4. Promotion- signifies the earning of enough credits to move from one grade to the next. Students earn credits by passing classes. Each year-long class earns half a credit per semester.
5. Retention- signifies the lack of credits earned in one year, which would have qualified students to promote to the next grade. There are several reasons for retaining a student: achievement, attendance, or sometimes, social issues. The retained student must repeat a grade level.
6. Dropout- refers to students who quit school before earning a diploma, regardless of whether or not they completed high school requirements later, by way of acquiring a General Education Diploma (GED).
7. Transition- The period in which students move from eighth grade in a middle school environment to 9<sup>th</sup> grade in a high school setting.
8. Minority- For the purpose of this study, this term refers to any denomination other than Caucasian, since they are the majority group in the high school in which the study will take place.
9. Bridges Program- A program that helps struggling middle school students successfully transition into high school. Bridges is held in the summer prior to ninth grade
10. Advisory – A time during the day, similar to a homeroom, where teachers build relationships with students. This time is set aside for clubs to meet, for students to receive extra help in classes, take make-up tests, etc.

## CHAPTER II

### Review of Literature

#### Introduction

This review of related literature discusses the importance of increasing the graduation rate as a means to meet the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) published as a law in 2002, as stated by the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO 2005 p. 1). The GAO stated that No Child Left Behind requires schools to use “graduation rates, along with test scores, to assess how much progress high schools are making in educating their students” (p. 6). This review focuses on students finding it difficult to adapt to high school as one of the significant causes of the alarmingly high national dropout rate. Reyes, Gillock, Kobus, and Sanchez (2000) show that students leaving the safe and nurturing environment of middle school and entering the overwhelming, less structured atmosphere of high school, experience feelings of culture shock. Letgers and Kerr (2001) found that the student-teacher relationship is almost non-existent, causing students to exhibit low self-esteem regarding academics, which often leads to poor performance and ultimately dropping out of high school. This review will also discuss the difficulties adolescents experience in transitioning from middle school to high school. In addition, school size also has been found to play a role in student success (Ayers, Bracey and Smith, 2000; Clarke and Kohn, 2002; Fine and Somerville, 1998; Holland and Mazzoli, 2001; Lee and Smith, 1997). This review discusses the correlation between school size and student achievement. Finally, the review looks at literature on Small Learning Communities and Freshman

Academies as intervention programs leading to a reduction in the dropout rate and an increase in student achievement.

### **The Dropout Rate**

There is a national concern for the dropout rate in the United States. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2009) indicated that graduation rates are essentially used as an indicator showing whether or not the United States education system is performing its intending duties: enrolling, engaging, and educating youth to be productive members of society. They also claimed that 7,000 students drop out of high school each day. The United States Department of Education, in a thorough study of all high schools in the United States, conducted by Laird, DeBell, Kienzl, and Chapman in 2007, found that in the fall of 2005, 3.5 million people in the age range of 15-24, or 9.4 percent of Americans in the same age range, were not enrolled in high school and had not earned a high school diploma or a Certificate of General Educational Development (GED). Even more disturbing are the localized findings from the Alliance for Excellent Education (2009) which reported that only 70 percent of Tennessee high school students in the 2005-06 school year graduated with a diploma or GED in four years, the normal expected amount of time for graduation. Within these findings, it is reported that only 58 percent of African American students graduated in four years, and only 53 percent of Hispanic students graduated in four years. Nationally, they concluded that students from extremely low incomes are seven times more likely to drop out than students from the highest incomes. Furthermore, Laird, et al. (2007) concluded that Tennessee specifically reported that in the 2003-04 school year, they, along with 11 other states, graduated below 70 percent of students in the four years required. Those students who were over the age of

18 and had not earned a high school diploma earned an average of \$20,100 annually, while students who had earned a high school diploma, including a GED earned an average income of \$29,700 annually. They also reported a higher percentage of high school dropouts disproportionately to be prison inmates (p. 1). Laird, et al. (2007) also claimed that four out of every 100 students dropped out during the 2004-2005 school year, but they do recognize that this number indicates a continued decrease in dropout rates.

Jimerson, Ferguson, Whipple, Anderson, and Dalton (2002), in their longitudinal study of rates of retention and dropout, concluded that many characteristics are present in a majority of students who drop out, such as poor academic performance and social adjustment problems. It is a “Multiplicity of factors co-occurring throughout development, all of which contribute to an increasingly deleterious trajectory over time” (p.54). The same study also found that variables such as low self-esteem, behavioral problems (including suspensions and expulsions), and lower academic achievement also increase a student’s risk of dropping out. The United States Department of Education, in its 2007 study, similarly concluded that students, especially in large schools, lack an understanding of the investment in learning, and that this lack of understanding results in overall lower academic achievement. Examining the primary causes of dropping out has led to the development of programs specifically designed to prevent students from making this choice. The problems in school include: lack of readiness for high school, limited English-language skills, absenteeism, low expectations, or lack of engagement in the education process (Riley, 2000). DaGiau (2000), in her study of problems related to the transition to high school, found that in addition to these more abnormal problems,

many teens are also experiencing a change in their physical appearance and a natural change in familial relationships caused by the teenage desire to gain independence. DaGiau went on to discuss the findings of Piaget who found that during this stage of development, teenagers, in addition to wanting independence, also “challenge authority and rebel against limitations” (p. 5). Contrarily, Neild, Stoner-Eby, and Furstenberg (2008) maintained that the indicators for dropout, including achievement, attendance, and behavior, might already have been an issue for potential drop-out students but these issues become more recognized, and therefore publicized, during the ninth grade year, when graduation is on the line. They continued by claiming that because it is difficult to prove that these issues began before high school, it is still mandatory that well developed intervention programs be established to assist ninth grade students to change and thereby overcome these destructive patterns. The study conducted by Neild, Stoner-Eby, and Furstenberg concluded that predictors in the ninth grade year, including family circumstances, academic achievements, and school involvement, can give administrators an indication of which students are at risk for dropping out. However, no matter what the causes, the bottle-neck is becoming a holding tank for students who repeat the ninth grade (Wheelock & Miao, 2005). These students begin to feel as if they will never recover, and seeing no other option, they choose to drop out. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2009) stated that:

By dropping out, these individuals significantly diminish their chances to secure a good job and a promising future. Moreover, each class of dropouts is responsible for substantial financial and social costs to their communities, states, and country in which they live. (p. 2)

In addition to lower earned wages, this source also found that the government will spend over seventeen billion dollars on Medicaid for the 2006 high school dropouts if they fail to find jobs that offer health benefits. Moreover, they concluded that if the graduation rates of minority students were to be raised to be equal to the rates of whites, the United States economy would benefit with a potential increase of over \$310 billion in personal income.

According to Jimerson and Kaufman (2003), evidence-based intervention programs would help at-risk students progress more quickly and/or catch up with their peers. These programs may also aide at-risk students in developing more positive, productive social skills. Gladden (1998) observed, “The Ultimate test of a school is its ability to graduate students in a timely manner and provide them with the opportunity to go to college or to find a better job than they would without a high school degree” (p. 127). It is essential for middle schools to adopt a transition program of some sort that allows students to understand what high school will be like before the ninth grade year begins (Mizelle and Irvin, 2000).

The Freshman Academy, as an intervention to deter high school students from dropping out, was developed from a school-within-a-school philosophy supposing that small schools are more successful than larger schools in the area of overall academic achievement. Hill (2001) concluded that academic achievement is greater in small schools and that the dropout rate is lower in these schools as well. Creating a separate wing for Freshman Academy, with a team of teachers, attempts to create the atmosphere of a smaller school, thus increasing student achievement. Wheelock and Miao (2005) claimed that a team of teachers with common planning is not enough. They felt that a

Freshman Academy should include: a strong relationship with parents and the community with an emphasis on college and career preparedness, academic tutorial sessions to ensure students understand standards being taught, and professional development, throughout the year to maximize teacher efficacy. Wasley and Lear (2001) agreed that parental involvement is essential. They credit parental involvement as being one of the keys to the success of small schools, claiming that it is easier to develop relationships with parents when the schools are not too large.

### **Transition to High School**

Letgers and Kerr (2001) and Reyes, et al. (2000) maintained that many students find it difficult to adjust to high school. This often results in low grades, high absences, a high number of discipline referrals, and a high number of dropouts. High schools are typically larger and offer less support than elementary and middle schools, creating an environment that requires a great deal of adaptation to succeed. In addition to this transition, students are also faced with “issues of personal identity, changing family systems and the impact of substance abuse, violence, teen pregnancy, rising dropout rates and emotional problems” (DaGiau, 2000 p. 13). Adolescents entering the ninth grade are still developing cognitively; this causes a desire to take new risks. Often taking risks at such a young age includes an inability to adequately think about the short and long term consequences (Price, 2005). An article written by Wheelock and Miao (2005) maintained that there are an increasing number of students enrolling in 9<sup>th</sup> grade when compared to 8<sup>th</sup> grade enrollments the previous year. Approximately the same number of students from one 8<sup>th</sup> grade year should enroll the following year into 9<sup>th</sup> grade, but this is not the case. The article reports an average of 13 percent increase in 9<sup>th</sup> grade enrollments. This

showed that on average 13 percent of 9<sup>th</sup> grade students are failing. They found, comparatively, that the enrollment for 10<sup>th</sup> grade during this same year, 2001, was approximately 12 percent smaller than the previous year. These numbers are tame compared to the findings of McIntosh and White (2006) who found that 71 percent of freshmen are transitioning effectively into high school leaving 29 percent of freshman failing this pivotal year. They concluded that these numbers are extremely high while research shows us that making a smooth transition can be a determining factor in whether or not these students graduate from high school or choose to drop out.

In a significant study conducted using 56 Georgia and Florida high schools, Hertzog and Morgan (1999) concluded that lower dropout rates and higher achievement rates exist for schools utilizing transition programs. Letgers and Kerr (2001) also concluded that students that lack motivation or interest found the transition even more difficult, thus putting them at a greater risk of failure. A study conducted by Alspaugh (2000) comparing systems that had three schools (elementary, middle, and high) to systems with two schools (elementary and high school) found that systems with only one transition from elementary to high school indicated a statistically significant difference. Alspaugh (2000) claimed that having one transition, earlier than ninth grade, can reduce the stress a student undergoes during their adolescent years.

Culture often plays a role in the level of student achievement. Reyes et al. (2000) stated that this transition is even more difficult for minority students. Laird et al. (2007) found that minority students, with the exception of Asian and Pacific Islander students, were more likely to drop out of high school. Reyes et al. (2000) tracked a group of minority students from elementary school through high school. Subjects included 235

students from two schools in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and 25 high schools. This group of minority students included both males and females. A control group matching the demographics was selected. Only 6 subjects maintained their Grade Point Average (GPA) during the transition to high school. By the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, only 42 percent of their subjects were on track to graduate. They found that of the students that graduated, many showed a decrease in achievement during their transition to high school. A limitation to this study was that the subjects for the study attended a k-8 elementary school, therefore, not attending middle school at all. This could make the transition from one environment to another even more difficult. Reyes et al. (2000) used this as a positive; however, as noted earlier in this study, Gruhn and Douglass (1947) found that the primary reason for creating middle schools was to assist in the transition to high school. In the conclusions of her literature review on the effects of the ninth-grade transition in African-Americans, Holcomb-McCoy (2007) concluded that it is important that a high school offer any opportunity to ensure students' success. She continued by concluding that because African-Americans typically are one of the most likely minority groups to drop out, it is especially important to assist these students.

Wheelock and Miao (2005) also found a significant difference in the number of Hispanic and African American students repeating the 9<sup>th</sup> grade when compared to Caucasian students. This source reported, on average, about a 6-8 percent increase in the number of Caucasian students enrolling in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. However, they reported 23-27 percent enrollment increase for African American students and a 24-28 percent enrollment increase for Hispanic students enrolling in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. They explained that this created a "bulge" in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade and a "dip" in enrollment in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

In addition to culture, gender also plays a role in student achievement. A study using 45 schools was analyzed and concluded that there is a statistically significant difference in the number of females who drop out compared to males (Alspaugh, 2000). This is similar to the findings of Laird, Debell, Kienzl, and Chapman (2007) who concluded that 10.8 percent of males dropped out in 2005 compared to 8.0 percent of females. When comparing the number of male and female students' ages 18-24 who were not enrolled in a high school in 2005 yet who had not received a diploma or a GED, the study found that 85.4 percent of males had received a diploma compared to 89.8 percent of females. Furthermore, a study conducted nationally to discover why boys seem to be falling behind found that only 65 percent of males graduated compared to 72 percent of females (Greene and Winters, 2006). This difference increased when considering African-American and Hispanic males and females. The study found that while 59 percent of African-American females graduated, only 48 percent of African-American males graduated. The same was true of Hispanic students since 58 percent of Hispanic females earned a diploma compared to 49 percent of Hispanic males (Greene and Winters, 2006).

Mizelle and Irvin (2000) stated that, "The transition to high school has never been more treacherous nor the consequences more personally disastrous for so many" (p. 1). However, McIntosh and White (2006) offer hope. They claim that the more positive transition activities put into place before the ninth grade year begins and during the year, the more likely students are going to be successful in school. They attribute the following activities to the success of the school in their study, Findlay High School: ninth grade counselors meeting with small groups of eighth graders during the year to discuss

concerns, evenings with parent informational meetings about graduation requirements, a parent/student tour of the high school facility with extra-curricular booths set up, and having only ninth grade students attend the first day of school.

### **Research on School Size**

If students find the transition from middle school to high school overwhelming, the size of the school could be a factor in making a smooth transition. Students are accustomed to regimented days with large amounts of time with the same teachers and peers, creating supportive relationships. Therefore, high schools with fewer students may create a more familiar environment for incoming freshman. Research concluded that small schools function better than larger schools (Ayers, Bracey, and Smith, 2000). Armstrong (2006) stated that “throwing a student into a large and impersonal school environment does not show much thought or sensitivity with regard to this important responsibility” (p. 119) and goes on to quote Theodore Sizer who calls a large, yet good school an “oxymoron” (p. 151). Goodlad, as cited by Davant Williams (1990) stated that “It is not impossible to have a good large school; it is simply more difficult” (p. 309). Cotton (2001) maintained that small schools offer a better opportunity for students and teachers to care about one another. Similarly, Gladden (1998) maintained that students who attend a smaller school are more likely to succeed academically, graduate, and enter a university. It can be something as simple as being able to fit the entire school into an assembly, making sports or school activities the center of school life, or being able to develop or change a school’s culture easier with fewer students (Wasley and Lear 2001). Fine and Somerville (1998) stated that:

When done well... small schools can be remarkable for improving the intellectual and social life of children, youth, educators, and parents. Successful small schools provide an educational environment where all students can achieve at high levels and where staff have exciting opportunities to teach and learn... and small schools can be a systematic strategy for inciting momentum into urban school reform.

(p.104)

Similarly, a study conducted by Lee and Smith (1997) found that it was actually schools with enrollments of 600-1200 students that perform the best academically. Schools below 600, surprisingly, performed low. However, there were a higher number of low socioeconomic students in the schools with the lowest and highest number of students enrolled, which may have negatively affected the results. In addition, there were a high number of minorities in the schools with the higher enrollment numbers, which could also have led to the lower achievement on standardized tests. Lee and Smith concluded that the lower achievement in schools with less than 600 students, induced by standardized testing, could have to do with the programs that schools with less than 600 students can offer, or which programs they cannot offer. Being able to offer a larger variety of programs is why large schools were thought to be better for students at one time. It was decided that larger schools were able to offer more diverse courses, reaching the interests of students. In contrast, Wasley and Lear (2001) found that schools that enroll between 200 and 400 students have proven to be extremely effective. They reference a study using 90 Chicago schools and their success as proof. Small schools in the study had higher grade point averages and attendance rates and lower dropout rates. Wasley and Lear (2001) specifically stated that a school with more than 500 students will

be more unlikely to produce the same results, but like others mentioned, they do feel that small learning communities are effective when implemented correctly. They also stated that systems become “locked into the notion that a large selection of courses is the best way to meet student needs” (p. 25). The biggest gains, according to Wasley and Lear (2000) included a deeper relationship between student and teacher and a feeling of safety for students. For teachers, they report teachers feel more professional satisfaction, efficacy, a high number of opportunities for collaboration, and more parental involvement.

Shakrani (2008) concluded that since 2001, 1800 new small high schools have been built to replace the larger high schools that have been labeled as ineffective. However, he argues that large schools that restructure the existing buildings into schools-within-schools are more efficient and may be just as effective. He makes the point that it is only in urban areas with low socioeconomic households and many minority students that large schools do not function effectively. Therefore, according to Shakrani (2008), it is imperative for a school district to consider its demographics before committing the capital in such an investment. According to Shakrani (2008), a school that met these conditions is Wyandotte High School in Kansas. The school enrolled over 1,500 students from low-socioeconomic households, the majority of which were minorities (90 percent). After implementing four small learning communities, all mean scores in areas of concern showed significant increase, including discipline, achievement, attendance, and graduation rates. Similarly, Shakrani (2008) also shared the results of the New York City school district, which has opened more than 180 small schools in the last five years. Again, the results showed high graduation rates and attendance, and a lower number of

behavior problems. In contrast to the Kansas school, however, the New York City reformation did not result in positive changes in achievement. No statistically significant difference was noted between the small schools and the comparison group. Furthermore, Shakrani (2008) argued that it is difficult to give all the credit of successes to the fact that the students in either school were attending smaller schools. Most students in the schools involved in the studies were from failing schools, and a new environment might have contributed to the success. Also, many schools that were resized enrolled a high number of minority students, and Cotton (2001) found that these students, statistically, perform better in small environments. Owens (2010) concurs with this statement. She compared small learning communities with small schools and their effectiveness with minority students. Owens (2010) concluded that small schools have a 10 percent lower dropout rate than schools with small learning communities. However, Owens admits that a weakness in the study might be that she was able to use only three schools in the Sacramento City Unified School District.

A study conducted by Howley and Howley (2004) also found inconsistent results using schools nationwide to determine whether or not there is a correlation between school size and socioeconomic status. They concluded that there is a strong statistically significant difference in achievement for smaller schools compared to larger school when the student body has a high number of low socioeconomic students. However, they found that there is no statistically significant difference in achievement for larger schools when compared to small schools when the student body has a high number of high socioeconomic students. The same results were true when they compared schools nationally to schools in only rural areas. Therefore, Howley and Howley (2004)

concluded that the size of the school has the most impact on students when the student body consists largely of low socioeconomic students. Similarly, the results of a study performed by Maxey (2008) also concluded that poverty levels have a tremendous influence on student achievement. Maxey set out to compare the ACT and SAT composite scores of the graduating 2007 class in South Carolina to the size of schools. He found that the larger the school, the higher the ACT and SAT composite scores and the higher the level of poverty in a school, the lower the ACT and SAT composite scores. These results led him to the conclusion that there is no statistically significant difference in student achievement (measured using ACT and SAT composite scores) when controlling for poverty.

Armstrong (2006) concluded that there are a number of middle schools that have recently been deemed failures apparently due to the fact that they were “large, impersonal, and overcrowded, alleviating the sense of belonging and support a student needs to feel to be successful” (p. 213). Cotton (2001) was quick to point out that not all school reforms from large to small are successful. Without careful implementation, the program can result in the numbers that large schools across the nation are seeing: low graduation rates, attendance rates, and achievement, and a high number of discipline referrals. Cotton goes on to say that reducing to a smaller size should be viewed as “having an indirect effect on student learning” (p. 6). Likewise, Wood (2005) claimed that it is not enough to create small schools. Small schools, however, possess obvious advantages. Wood discussed the fact that the relationship between students and teachers is paramount to learning. He implied that teachers must be able to spend enough time with their students to learn how to teach them as individuals. And, in turn, students

should be able to spend the time needed with teachers to be able to trust them enough to learn from them. If a small school is designed to resemble a large school in the number of course offerings, lack of time dedicated to teacher-student relationships, lecture style classes, and students divided solely by grade level, they will have the same negative academic results as are found in large schools (Wasley and Lear 2001).

The push to transform large schools into smaller, more comfortable schools is prevailing. According to Wasley and Lear (2001), the federal government has awarded over \$40 billion to transform large schools and congress tripled that number in 2001 for the same purpose. This same source reported that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation will donate over \$350 million to assist small schools only.

### **Small Learning Communities: History and Today's Research**

Since research indicated that smaller sized schools make a positive difference, and students feel safer and will experience more academic success in a smaller environment, creating smaller schools may be a viable option (Ayers, Bracey, and Smith, 2000). Many ninth grade students find the transition difficult because of high teacher expectations, more homework and the pressure of choosing the right classes. This, along with the normal pressures of teenage life, leaves many students feeling inept. To solve this crisis, many districts are decreasing the size of their schools. Districts that do not want to take on the financial burden of opening new buildings are creatively using the space in the existing building to place students into schools-within-schools, which, according to Black, (2004) solved the crisis that included 70 percent attendance rate, high numbers of discipline referrals and high numbers of academic failures.

According to Tompkins (1988), a school district in Des Moines, Iowa, in the 1987-88 school year, implemented school-within-a-school programs in five of their high schools, successfully increasing the average days of school attended by students and decreasing the dropout rate to below the state average at the time. Though the overall numbers indicated a success, the school implemented several programs simultaneously and there was no way to determine the value of the school-within-a-school program itself. One of the program's goals was to find employment for each student upon graduation. In addition, at each school, only a small number of the student body was placed in the program. It was used as an intervention method for students at risk of dropping out of high school, and was never intended to be implemented for all students or even all students of any certain grade.

A study conducted between the years of 1987 through 1991 by Blasik, Sutton, Thomas, and Merenstein (1991) concluded that early detection of students who are likely to drop out of high school, and early intervention, is the key to greater student achievement and higher retention rates. Though the program in the school they studied, targeted only students at risk for dropping out, creating a smaller learning environment for these students was found to be beneficial. The school they studied also implemented a program involving shortening the high school experience by two years, by combining two years into one. This may have influenced the results of the study.

In a study of thirty of "America's most successful high schools," Daggett (2004) concluded that some type of small learning environment was the key to success. For example, Jacobsen (2000) found that a middle school in Georgia houses close to 3,000 students in five small learning communities. Students remain in one community the entire

3 years at the school, and the success of the school is credited to the relationships the teachers are able to build with their students, as well as the relationships the students create with each other. Wood (2005) concurred with this idea by noting the connections students form with teachers come from more than just the authoritative title. The connections, instead, form from daily interaction and commitment from both parties. Students, during adolescence, attempt to pull away from adults in order to gain independence. This tendency makes it especially important for adults to attempt to make connections with students. Adolescents need to trust relationships with adults in their lives so that they have someone reliable to talk to when they are overwhelmed (Price 2005). Wasley and Lear (2001) also found that a strong, positive teacher-student relationship is key to making small schools successful. In their study, Wasley and Lear (2001) found that an advisory period either daily or a few times a week improved these relationships. During advisory times, teachers help students with study skills, career or college research, goal setting, and problem-solving. The advisory teacher would advise the same group of students during all of the four high school years. McIntosh and White (2006) also claimed that an advisory time is important to strengthening the relationships between teachers and students in addition to giving students opportunities to receive assistance in classes in which they are falling behind.

In comparison, according to Smith (2008), Louis W. Fox Academic and Technical High School in San Antonio, Texas, achieved significant results when taking a school and creating four smaller learning communities within the building. The school was the lowest in the county in terms of achievement, and enrollment dropped by 600 students in five years. The academies were a huge success, credited with allowing teachers to

intervene with students who were at-risk of failing. The attendance rates increased while the dropout rate decreased by half. The school, after only one year, was no longer a failing school. Furthermore, after three years, the school was first in the district in several areas, including math scores on state achievement tests.

The government has also identified small learning communities as an effective means to both increase student achievement and increase the graduation rate, and have encouraged schools to implement this concept by offering millions of dollars to school systems to assist in the creation of such programs (Cotton, 2001). The government created the fund due to the perception that “students are too often lost and alienated in large, impersonal school structures leading to less effective learning environments” (U.S. Department of Education, 2007, P. 17). The report continued by stating that even with research concluding that academic achievement is better with smaller schools, the size of high schools, on average continue to grow. Furthermore, 64 percent of high schools enroll more than 1,000 students (the minimum requirement to be defined as a large school), and 42 percent have more than 1,500 students. Dissatisfied with these numbers, the government offers the funds to encourage districts to implement changes in their structure.

One trend on the rise, which helps schools solve the issues of large buildings, increasing dropout rates, and less than effective Careers and Technical Education (CTE) departments, is the development of career academies (Blomenkamp, 2009). This form of school-within-a-school environment divides students into academies based on career interests, such as automotive, construction, medical related fields, public service, etc. Kerkla (2009) maintained that career academies began as a way to reach students who

were potential dropouts. He also maintained that the academies were appealing to students wishing to attend college as well. Blomenkamp explained that, "Many students will prosper in education environments that foster experiential learning as opposed to the traditional industrial age school model" (p. 41). He also explained that the core classes serve as a rigorous way to assist students in developing real-world connections that bridge their career choices to what they are being taught in school. In some instances students are partnered with a mentor from the field they are studying (Blomenkamp, 2009). Also beneficial, according to Kerkla (2009), is the fact that students will work with their academy teachers for three years, enabling them to develop relationships that research has shown is key to student success. In his study of an Illinois high school, Kerkla (2009) found that students involved in a career academy claimed to share a bond with their teachers, have a sense of team with their peers, have a clear direction for their lives, and view their acceptance into the academy as a three year commitment. The National Academy Foundation found that 90 percent of students participating in academies graduate from high school and 80 percent of these students enroll in a college (Hyslop, 2009). Hyslop (2009) also pointed out the implementation of career academies involves little cost, a benefit to school systems feeling the pressure of a weak economy.

### **Freshman Academy**

Letgers and Kerr (2001) stated that the small learning community, such as a Freshman Academy, "is potentially one of the most dramatic ways in which a school can restructure to create a more welcoming and personalized environment for ninth graders" (p. 12). Creating a community where individuals want to invest their time and energy is imperative. Wood (2005) stated that, "Communities are places we feel we belong. We

know that without us, the community would not work as well and that the community values us" (p. 59). It is this feeling of belonging that makes Freshman Academies a success. Mizelle and Irvin (2000) also claimed that feeling comfortable is vital. They maintained that transition programs which included informational sessions with parents and students to discuss high school expectations and systems in which the middle schools and high schools collaborate on curriculum had a higher level of student success. Also, this source claimed that involving parents whenever possible, such as when choosing high school classes, also produced positive results.

In their seven-year study using schools with large numbers of low-income students and high numbers of minority students, Letgers and Kerr (2001) found that there was a dramatic increase in the promotion rate for schools with high levels of implementation as compared to promotion rates prior to implementation of Freshman Academy. Schools that only used a low level of implementation also had a growth in promotion rate, though it was less significant. The same is true with dropout rates for these schools. The high implementation schools saw drastic drops in the dropout rates and the schools with low implementation saw slight drops. In this study, Letgers and Kerr (2001) found that high implementing schools utilized strategies such as extended class periods, teams of teachers, regular advisory periods, and summer enrichment programs for low achieving eighth grade students. On the other hand, all but one of the schools involved in the study were named "reconstitution eligible" (p. 18) and, therefore, it is impossible to determine if all success given to the Freshman Academy was due solely to the program's success, or if pressure to succeed, and additional funds given to the schools had any influence.

Chmelynski (2004) reported of another district, in Georgia, which created an academy program for ninth grade students to decrease behavioral issues and the number of students being retained. The district had reported that 60 percent of discipline referrals were from ninth-grade students. Upon implementation of the program, students were separated from the rest of the student body and given an elective course titled High School 101 where they were taught study skills, time management, problem-solving skills, etc. After six years of the program, the results were significant. They found a 46 percent decrease in grade retentions and a 55 percent decrease in discipline referrals (Chmelynski, 2004). Similar results were also reported by Chmelynski (2004) for districts in Harrison, Tennessee, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Both school systems also reported significant decreases in behavior problems after the implementation of Freshman Academies. However, the Freshman Academy in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, required students to take two English and Math classes during the day, and the Harrison, Tennessee, school enrolled more than 2,600 students, a higher average than the typical American high school, which may have influenced results.

A dissertation submitted to the University of Southern Mississippi by Peasant (2006) compared three traditional high schools housing grades 9-12 with more than 1,000 students enrolled in each and three with buildings containing only 9<sup>th</sup> grade students. All schools used in the study each enrolled more than 350 freshman students. Using standardized test scores, and a t-test, Peasant concluded that there was a statistically significant difference in achievement between students who attended Freshman Academy and those students who did not. The results were especially significant for African-American students. The mean score for the Biology test used for the comparative group

was more than 50 points higher for African-American students than the mean score for African-American students in the control group. Demographics for each school were similar. While some schools had all first-time ninth graders take Biology, some schools had only the higher achieving students enrolled in the course. This may have affected the results.

Clarke and Kohn (2002) described successful outcomes for Reagan High School in San Antonio, Texas. Reagan High School enrolled almost 1,800 students, mostly Hispanic, with 75 percent qualifying for free and reduced lunch. Eight-hundred students were enrolled in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Reagan High School organized academies for both the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades, separately. The details were similar to others in this review. They had smaller class sizes and a team of teachers. They also implemented project-based learning. Test scores on all achievement tests administered increased, showing significant gains.

The United States Department of Education (Riley, 2000) conducted a study using schools that have implemented small learning communities, including, but not limited to Freshman Academies. Their study used schools with a mean enrollment of 1,874 students, including a mean of 60 percent minority enrollment. All schools included in the study were granted government funding for the implementation of a small learning community program. A majority of the participating schools with Freshman Academies, 95 percent of them, requested funding to increase student achievement. Similar to the study conducted by Letgers and Kerr (2001), this study also used three levels of implementation; low, medium, and high implementation. The schools with high implementation met at least one time weekly to discuss students' needs, and had autonomy over at least part of the program policies. Ten schools qualified to remain in

the study after strict guidelines were established. Schools must have been using high implementation and have 100 percent of student participation in order to remain in the study. The chosen comparison group consisted of 4,733 schools.

The study by Riley (2000) found that even after the three-year period when schools received grant money for the program, there was a statistically significant increase in the freshman students promoted to the next grade level. Interestingly, the study also found that schools reported that implementing Freshman Academies positively affected other areas such as teacher attitudes, faculty expertise, parental attitudes, and adequacy of curriculum. On the other hand, the report concluded that there were no statistically significant differences in the achievement level of students in freshman academies. The methodology for the study consisted of surveys conducted by the schools and follow-up site visits, and phone interviews. However, The United States Department of Education (Riley, 2000) suggested that the results may not be accurate since the study only used the three-year period that funding was given to the schools, and it may take longer to view valid results. Additionally, schools reporting results for Freshman Academy may have implemented other small learning community programs such as career academies, and magnet schools. Carlo Prandini (2008), for his dissertation, studied nine high schools with enrollments of over 1,300 students ranking in the top 10 percent of schools, according to the California Academic Performance Index. He found that not all schools specifically contained a Freshman Academy, though 67 percent of the schools contained a program to support the transition into high school for ninth grade students.

Cotton (2001) concluded that one of the most important factors in creating an effective Freshman Academy, or any small learning community, is autonomy. She quoted

Wasley, who conducted a study using small Chicago schools, as saying that, “When the small schools were guaranteed enough autonomy to bring their ideas to fruition, they were more invested in the school and its students” (p. 21). Wood (2005) also felt that authoritative figures and students must create an autonomous unit in order for maximum success to occur. Howley and Howley (2004) might agree that levels or implementation are essential for ensuring success. They stated that:

A ninth grade academy with 300 students will likely embed the sorts of structured disadvantages associated with 9-12 schools enrolling 1,200 students. A ninth-grade “academy” with 300 students, is not, in other words, a “smaller school.”  
(p. 26)

Howley and Howley (2004) claimed that the only way to truly maintain a small school effectively is to have complete autonomy and this can only be achieved with an actual small school, not a school-within-a-school.

It is not just the reduction in student body size and the student to teacher ratio that makes a difference. Holland and Mazzoli (2001) mentioned the importance of the relationships built between students and adults. According to the authors, the faculty “promised to become so involved in the lives of their students that no one would be left behind” (p. 9). Wood (2005) wrote, on the eve of a senior graduation, about the importance of education, about sending students into the world to become contributing citizens of society. But more than anything, Wood (2005) stated that:

“It isn’t the Math, English, or Science they have learned that will make the difference. It is the character of their hearts, the clearness of their minds, and the

steadfastness of their wills that will determine what type of communities and lives we all share." (p. 19)

Teachers who only teach their subject areas are not effective. Often, it is the life lessons that students remember the most. It is what one helps add to their character by investing in the development of it.

## **Conclusion**

Cotton (2001) quoted Tom Gregory as saying, "A large and increasingly consistent body of research suggests that we should be moving, not toward larger high schools, but expeditiously toward smaller ones" (p. 1). This, however, does not necessarily mean tearing down schools across the country and building new ones. As the research has shown, if the right steps are taken to ensure a smooth transition from middle school to high school, it is equally effective to divide the existing schools into small learning communities by dedicating areas of the school or hallways to individual academies. Transition programs indirectly attribute to the success of ninth grade students by meeting the academic, social, and emotional needs of these adolescents. One such transition program is the Freshman Academy, designed specifically to assist ninth-grade students with their transition to high school, a less controlled environment than middle school. Freshmen find it difficult to transition from a more nurturing and supportive environment of middle school to a culture that requires more self-discipline, yet often higher academic expectations. Not providing this support in the transition has shown to lead to a high number of discipline referrals and absences, and low achievement scores, all subsequently leading to a higher dropout rate. Therefore, it is essential that programs be implemented to assist this transition. Freshman Academies, if implemented correctly,

provide the structure “inside the school that focuses student attention, provides close contact between students and teachers, and opens up the possibility for students to become the adults we know they can be” (Wood, 2005, p. 62).

## CHAPTER III

### Methodology

#### Overview

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of Freshman Academy on student achievement, attendance, and discipline and to examine these elements with consideration to both gender and ethnicity for first time freshmen enrolled during the 2007-2008 school year. The Austin Peay State University Institutional Review Board approved this study. Ethnicity was divided into two categories due to the sample size, consisting of the majority group and the minority group. The majority group included Caucasian, while the minority group consisted of African-American, Hispanic, Asian, and other. It is highly advantageous for schools and systems to conduct research on effective programs in order to reduce the dropout rate and meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind.

The Middle Tennessee High School used in the study is located in Tennessee close to the Kentucky border and is part of a growing community with an accompanying growth in the number of schools. In order to offer students the best possible education, the school-within-a-school philosophy was developed. The Freshman Academy was developed as a part of this plan, established to assist students' transition from middle school to high school, reduce the number of retentions, reduce the numbers of freshman discipline referrals, and increase the average daily attendance rates. This study evaluated Freshman Academy and its effectiveness by comparing students enrolled in Freshman Academy during the 2007-2008 school year to students in the same school before the Freshman Academy was implemented, the 2005-2006 school year.

The Freshman Academy at the Middle Tennessee High School was developed after extensive research and was implemented in the 2006-2007 school year. The Middle Tennessee High School piloted the program for the county's school system in Tennessee. An administrator is assigned to the academy, as well as a guidance counselor. The academy is given a wing in the school and all core subject freshman teachers are located in that area. A set of common rules and expectations, as well as consequences, has been developed, and teachers are assigned to a team. Students are placed on teams, meaning that most students will travel together from class to class. Again, the idea was to create a smaller school environment inside a school of 1600 students. Teacher teams are given a common planning time and meet at least once a week during this time to discuss issues or problems with students.

Freshman Academy teachers and the administrator host an open house for parents and students to tour the school and meet the teachers. Parents are given a class schedule and they travel with their student from class-to-class. These first-day classes usually last ten minutes each and are designed so that the teacher can relay important information to parents and so that parents can get to know their student's teachers. Parent involvement was an important consideration in the design of the Freshman Academy.

## **Research Design**

The research conducted was descriptive using quantitative data. Data obtained from Freshman Academy at a Middle Tennessee High School was examined to determine the effectiveness of the program. All data are archival, collected as numerical data and no additional treatment was given to subjects. Permission was granted from the University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the Director of Schools for the school system in

which the Middle Tennessee High School used for the study is located. Personnel, in a position which allows them to view student data, from the County's Central office, gave data from the school to the researcher. The data provided the researcher contained no markers or references to any student or group of students other than the approved categories which the school system and the APSU Institutional Review Board had previously agreed to. These data were analyzed using statistical methods. The researcher did not have access to any student names.

## **Participants**

Participants in this study were selected because they attended Freshman Academy at the Middle Tennessee High School. The population for the study included all ninth-grade students enrolled at the high school during the years 2005-2006 and 2007-2008. The school is the largest in the county where the high school is located for the years used in the study and it had a diverse student body. There were a total of 511 students in the Freshman Academy program in the 2007-2008 school year and 428 students in the freshman class during the 2005-2006 school year.

## **Instrumentation**

Archival data were used for this study. This data included average daily attendance records and discipline records. Data were gathered from the MacSchool system used by the county's school system during the time of the study. The data were delivered to the researcher in the form of a spreadsheet to ensure no biases occur.

## **Procedure**

Data were collected from Central Office for the Middle Tennessee High School in the form of a spreadsheet. This data included the number of discipline referrals for the

total freshman student body, attendance records, and the number of students retained.

These scores provided the dependent variables for the study. There was no manipulation of the variables as the data are archival.

Students were given numbers, and were only identified using these numbers. No names were used. Since means were used to test the hypotheses, no biases have occurred. Subgroups consisting of gender, majority race vs. minority race were established to determine the effectiveness of Freshman Academies on student achievement, attendance, and the number of discipline referrals.

The goal of this study was to estimate differences, if any, between the freshman students before the implementation of Freshman Academy to the second year of implementation. All tests were performed at the .05 level of significance.

Students included in the study were first time 9<sup>th</sup> graders attending a Middle Tennessee high school. The school district borders a military post, and therefore, many students enroll and withdraw at all times of the school year due to military transfers. In order to get the truest results, the central office personnel gave the researcher the numbers and means for the Average Daily Membership at the end of the year. With a 30 percent mobility rate, identifying students only present for the entire year is difficult.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The entire population of first-time Freshman Academy students enrolled at the Middle Tennessee High School was used. Data for this information were gathered from Central Office. Researcher did not have access to names. Only numerical identifiers were used. All data are archival.

The means and standard deviations for those students enrolled in Freshman Academy and those freshman students in the 2005-06 year (before the implementation of Freshman Academy) and the 2007-08 year (second year of implementation) were reported separately for the number of discipline referrals, number of students promoted/retained and average number of days attended. The null hypotheses stated that there were no statistically significant differences in the number of discipline referrals, promotion or retention rates, or attendance for first time ninth graders at the Middle Tennessee high school after the implementation of Freshman Academy as compared to before the implementation of Freshman Academy. A Chi-Square was used to analyze the promotion rate and the number of discipline referrals at the level of significance of .05. A *t*-test was used to analyze the average number of days attended for the two years in order to compare the attendance rates of the freshman students for both years using a level of significance of .01, calculated using a graphing calculator.

A Chi-Square was also used to compare the achievement and number of students promoted/retained for first time ninth graders after the implementation of Freshman Academy as compared to before the implementation of Freshman Academy in terms of gender and ethnicity using a level of significance of .05, calculated using a graphing calculator. A *t*-test was used to analyze attendance records in terms of gender and ethnicity.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **Analysis of the Data**

#### **Introduction**

As determined in the second chapter, the importance of the ninth grade year is fundamental to students' overall high school success. The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of Freshman Academy at a Middle Tennessee high school as an intervention program in the areas of student achievement, attendance, and discipline as measured by attendance rates, numbers of discipline referrals, and numbers of students retained for male and female students as well as Caucasian and minority students enrolled in the program. This chapter includes a summary of the findings of the analyses of the data for the nine null hypotheses tested.

#### **Demographics**

Students' demographic information was gathered from the county's Central Office. All data were archival and only numerical identifiers were given to the researcher. Information gathered included gender and ethnicity for both 2005-2006 and 2007-2008 school years. Ethnicity was divided into two categories; the majority group consisted of white students and the minority group consisted of all other ethnicities. Other ethnicities included Hispanic, African American, Asian and Pacific Islander.

There were a total of 939 students used in the study. 428 freshman students were used from the 2005-2006 school year and 511 freshman students were used from the 2007-2008 school year. Freshman students in 2005-2006 participated in a traditional high school, whereas students enrolled in the 2007-2008 year participated in a stand alone

Freshman Academy program. As depicted in Table 1, results indicated that 458 (49%) females participated in the study compared to 481 (51%) males. In terms of ethnicity, a total of 438 (47%) students of the majority ethnicity participated in the study and 501 (53%) students of the minority ethnicities participated in the study.

**Table 1**

Demographics

Variables	Traditional (2005-2006)		Stand Alone (2007-2008)		Total
	n	%	n	%	
<b>Gender</b>					
Female	209	49%	249	49%	458
Male	219	51%	262	51%	481
Total	428		511		939
<b>Ethnicity</b>					
Majority	197	46%	241	47%	438
Minority	231	54%	270	53%	501
Total	428		511		939

The sample from the 2005-2006 school year included all enrolled freshman students. Participants included 209 (49%) females and 219 (51%) males. There were 197 (46%) participants in the majority ethnicity group and 231 (54%) participants in the minority ethnicity group. The sample from the 2007-2008 school year included all enrolled freshman in the stand alone Freshman Academy. Participants included 249

(49%) females and 262 (51%) males. There were 241(47%) participants in the majority ethnicity group and 270 (53%) participants in the minority ethnicity group.

### **Null Hypothesis 1**

There will be no statistically significant difference in the promotion/retention rates of first time 9<sup>th</sup> graders at a Middle Tennessee high school after the implementation of Freshman Academy as compared to before the implementation of Freshman Academy?

Hypothesis 1 was analyzed using a Chi-Square. Table 2 illustrates the total numbers and means of the promotions and retentions for both years studied. A freshman student must have earned four credits in order to be promoted at the conclusion of the school year. A half credit is earned per semester class, therefore, a student can earn up to six credits per year. Table 2 reveals that the Freshman Academy at the Middle Tennessee high school studied had no significant impact on promotion or retention rates. In the 2005/06 school year, there were 428 total students enrolled in the freshman class. No Freshman Academy was established at this time. While 405 students were promoted to the next grade level, 23 students did not earn enough credits to be promoted and therefore were retained. This reveals a promotion rate of 95 percent. During the 2007/08 school year, when Freshman Academy was in its second full year, there were 511 first time freshman students enrolled in the program. At the conclusion of this year, 482 Freshman Academy students were promoted to the next grade level and 29 students were retained. This reveals a promotion rate of 94 percent.

A chi-square analysis was completed on both years in question using a two by two contingency table. The results yielded a  $\chi^2 = .04$ , a  $df = 1$ , and a  $p$  value of .84. Research was conducted using a level of significance of .05. These data concluded, because the  $p$

value was above the alpha of .05, the percentage of Freshman Academy students promoted was not statistically significant. The promotion and retention rates from before the implementation of Freshman Academy was almost identical to the promotion and retention rates after Freshman Academy was implemented.

**Table 2**

Chi-Square for Promotion Rates of First-Time Ninth-Grade Students by Year

	Promoted		Retained		Total
	n	%	n	%	
2005-06	405	95%	23	5%	428
2007-08	482	94%	29	6%	511
Total	887		52		939

$$\chi^2 = .04, P = .84, df = 1$$

### Null Hypothesis 2

There will be no statistically significant difference in the promotion/retention rates of first time 9<sup>th</sup> graders at a Middle Tennessee high school after the implementation of Freshman Academy as compared to before the implementation of Freshman Academy in terms of gender?

Hypothesis 2 was analyzed using a Chi Square analysis. Table 3 illustrates the total numbers and means of the promotions and retentions for female freshman students for both years studied. The table reveals that the Freshman Academy at the Middle Tennessee high school studied has no significant impact on promotion or retention rates

for females. In the 2005/06 school year, there were 209 total female students enrolled in the freshman class. No Freshman Academy was established at this time. While 198 females were promoted to the next grade level, 11 female students did not earn enough credits to be promoted and therefore were retained. This reveals a promotion rate of 95 percent. During the 2007/08 school year, when Freshman Academy was in its second full year, there were 249 female freshman students enrolled in the program. At the conclusion of this year, 236 female students were promoted to the next grade level and 13 female students were retained. This reveals a promotion rate of 95 percent.

**Table 3**

Chi Square for Promotion Rates of First-Time Ninth-Grade Female Students by Year

	Promoted		Retained		Total
	n	%	n	%	
2005/06	198	95 %	11	5 %	209
2007/08	236	95 %	13	5 %	249
Total	434		24		458

$$\chi^2 = .1, P = .75, df = 1$$

A Chi Square analysis was completed for female students on both years in question using a two by two contingency table. The results yielded a  $\chi^2 = .1$ , a  $df = 1$ , and a  $p$  value of .75. Research was conducted using a level of significance of .05. Because the  $p$  value was above the alpha of .05, it can be concluded that the percentage of female Freshman Academy students promoted was not statistically significant. The promotion

and retention rates for females from before the implementation of Freshman Academy was almost identical to the promotion and retention rates for females after Freshman Academy was implemented.

Table 4 illustrates the total numbers and means of the promotions and retentions for male freshman students for both years studied. The table reveals that the Freshman Academy at the Middle Tennessee high school studied had no significant impact on the promotion or retention of male students. In the 2005/06 school year, there were 231 total male students enrolled in the freshman class. No Freshman Academy was established at this time. While 219 male students were promoted to the next grade level, 12 males did not earn enough credits to be promoted and therefore were retained. This reveals a promotion rate of 95 percent. During the 2007/08 school year, when Freshman Academy was in its second full year, there were 278 male freshman students enrolled in the program. At the conclusion of this year, 262 male Freshman Academy students were promoted to the next grade level and 16 were retained. This reveals a promotion rate of 95 percent.

A Chi-Square analysis was completed for male students on both years in question using a two by two contingency table. The results yielded a  $\chi^2 = .06$ , a  $df = 1$ , and a  $p$  value of .806. Research was conducted using a level of significance of .05. This data concluded, because the  $p$  value was above the alpha of .05, the percentage of male Freshman Academy students promoted was not statistically significant. The promotion and retention rates for male students from before the implementation of Freshman Academy was almost identical to the promotion and retention rates after Freshman Academy was implemented.

**Table 4**

Chi-Square for Promotion Rates of First-Time Ninth-Grade Male Students by Year

	Promoted		Retained		Total
	n	%	n	%	
2005/06	219	95%	12	5%	231
2007/08	262	95%	16	5%	278
Total	481		28		509

$$\chi^2 = .06, P = .806, df = 1$$

### Null Hypothesis 3

There will be no statistically significant difference in the promotion/retention rates of first time 9<sup>th</sup> graders at a Middle Tennessee high school after the implementation of Freshman Academy as compared to before the implementation of Freshman Academy in terms of ethnicity?

Hypothesis 3 was analyzed using a Chi-Square analysis. Table 5 illustrates the total numbers and means of the promotions and retentions for freshman students of the majority race (Caucasian) for both years studied. The table reveals that the Freshman Academy at the Middle Tennessee high school studied has no significant impact on promotion or retention rates for Caucasian students. In the 2005/06 school year, there were 197 total Caucasian students enrolled in the freshman class. No Freshman Academy was established at this time. While 185 Caucasians were promoted to the next grade level, 12 Caucasian students did not earn enough credits to be promoted and therefore

were retained. This reveals a promotion rate of 94 percent. During the 2007/08 school year, when Freshman Academy was in its second full year, there were 241 Caucasian freshman students enrolled in the program. At the conclusion of this year, 232 Caucasian students were promoted to the next grade level and 9 Caucasian students were retained. This reveals a promotion rate of 96 percent.

**Table 5**

Chi-Square for Promotion Rates of First-Time Ninth-Grade Majority Students by Year

	Promoted		Retained		Total
	n	%	n	%	
2005/06	185	94%	12	6%	197
2007/08	232	96%	9	4%	241
Total	417		21		438

$$\chi^2 = 1.41, P = .23, df = 1$$

A Chi-Square analysis was completed for Caucasian students on both years in question using a two by two contingency table. The results yielded a  $\chi^2 = 1.41$ , a  $df = 1$ , and a  $p$  value of .23. Research was conducted using a level of significance of .05. This data concluded, because the  $p$  value was above the alpha of .05, the percentage of Caucasian freshman academy students promoted was not statistically significant. The promotion and retention rates for Caucasian students from before the implementation of Freshman Academy was almost identical to the promotion and retention rates for Caucasian students after Freshman Academy was implemented.

Table 6 illustrates the total numbers and means of the promotions and retentions for minority freshman students for both years studied. The table reveals that the Freshman Academy at the Middle Tennessee high school studied had no significant impact on the promotion or retention of minority students.

**Table 6**

Chi-Square for Promotion Rates of First-Time Ninth-Grade Minority Students by Year

	Promoted		Retained		Total
	n	%	n	%	
2005/06	220	95%	11	5%	231
2007/08	250	93%	20	7%	270
Total	470		31		501

$$\chi^2 = 1.74, P = .187, df = 1$$

In the 2005/06 school year, there were 231 total minority students enrolled in the freshman class. No Freshman Academy was established at this time. While 220 minority students were promoted to the next grade level, 11 minority students did not earn enough credits to be promoted and therefore were retained. This reveals a promotion rate of 95 percent. During the 2007/08 school year, when Freshman Academy was in its second full year, there were 270 minority freshman students enrolled in the program. At the conclusion of this year, 250 minority Freshman Academy students were promoted to the next grade level and 20 were retained. This reveals a promotion rate of 93 percent.

A Chi-Square analysis was completed for minority students on both years in question using a two by two contingency table. The results yielded a  $X^2 = 1.74$ , a  $df = 1$ , and a  $p$  value of .187. Research was conducted using a level of significance of .05. This data concluded, because the  $p$  value was above the alpha of .05, the percentage of minority Freshman Academy students promoted was not statistically significant. The promotion and retention rates for minority students from before the implementation of Freshman Academy was almost identical to the promotion and retention rates after Freshman Academy was implemented.

#### **Null Hypothesis 4**

There will be no statistically significant difference in attendance rates of first time 9<sup>th</sup> graders at a Middle Tennessee high school after the implementation of Freshman Academy as compared to before the implementation of Freshman Academy.

Hypothesis four was analyzed using an unpaired t-test. An alpha level of .01 was used for all t-tests. The sample size was obtained by calculating the mean number of students enrolled at the high school. The mean, or average daily attendance, was obtained by calculating the mean number of students present daily for both the 2005/06 and 2007/08 school years. The researcher retrieved numbers, means, and standard deviation from central office personnel. During the 2005/06 school year a mean of 406 students attended school each day. 428 students, on average, were enrolled during the year. During the 2007/08 school year a mean of 484 students attended school each day. 511 students, on average, were enrolled during the year. This reveals an attendance rate of 95 percent for 2005/06 and a rate of 95 percent for 2007/08 school year. Table 7 illustrates the numbers and means of the attendance rates for first time ninth-grade students for both

years in addition to the results of the t-test. The t-test yielded a  $t = 37.295$ . The p-value was below the alpha of .01. Results of the t-test revealed a significant statistical difference between the attendance rates for the 2005/06 freshman class when compared to the 2007/08 freshman class.

**Table 7**

t-Test for Attendance Rates of First-Time Ninth-Grade Students by Year

year	n	M	SD	df	t	p
2005/06	428	406	9.3			
				937	37.295	0.00
2007/08	511	484	9.3			

$t = 37.295, P = .00, df = 1$

### Null Hypothesis 5

There will be no statistically significant difference in attendance rates of first time 9<sup>th</sup> graders at a Middle Tennessee high school after the implementation of Freshman Academy as compared to before the implementation of Freshman Academy in terms of gender?

Hypothesis five was analyzed using unpaired t-tests. An alpha level of .01 was used for all t-tests. The sample size was obtained by calculating the mean number of students enrolled at the high school. The mean, or average daily attendance, was obtained by calculating the mean number of students present for both the 2005/06 and 2007/08

school years. Researcher retrieved numbers, means, and standard deviation from central office personnel.

The attendance rate for male freshman students during the 2005/06 school year was 94.80 percent compared to the 94.70 percent attendance rate for male freshman students during the 2007/08 school year. The average daily attendance for freshman males in 2005/06 was 208 out of 219 while the average daily membership for freshman males in 2007/08 was 246 out of 262 enrolled students. Table 8 illustrates the numbers and means of the attendance rates for first time ninth-grade male and female students for both years in addition to the results of the t-tests. The t-test yielded a  $t = 75.29$ . The p-value was below the alpha of .01. Results of the t-test revealed a significant statistical difference between the males in the 2005/06 freshman class when compared to males in the 2007/08 freshman class.

**Table 8**

t-Test for Attendance Rates of First-Time Ninth-Grade Students by Year and Gender

Gender	n	M	SD	df	t	p
<b>Males</b>						
2005/06	219	208	6.03	479	75.29	0.00
2007/08	262	246	5.04			
<b>Females</b>						
2005/06	209	198	6.09	456	76.64	0.00
2007/08	249	238	5.08			

Males:  $t = 75.29, P = 0.00, df = 479$  Females:  $t = 76.64, P = 0.00, df = 456$

The attendance rate for female freshman students during the 2005/06 school year was 95 percent compared to the 96 percent attendance rate for female freshman students during the 2007/08 school year. The average daily attendance for freshman females in 2005/06 was 198 out of 209 while the average daily membership for freshman females in 2007/08 was 238 out of 249 enrolled students. As illustrated in Table 8, the t-test yielded a  $t = 76.64$ . The p-value was below the alpha of .01. Results of the t-test revealed a significant statistical difference between the females in the 2005/06 freshman class when compared to females in the 2007/08 freshman class.

#### **Null Hypothesis 6**

There will be no statistically significant difference in attendance rates of first time 9<sup>th</sup> graders at a Middle Tennessee high school after the implementation of Freshman Academy as compared to before the implementation of Freshman Academy in terms of ethnicity?

Hypothesis six was analyzed using unpaired t-tests. An alpha level of .01 was used for all t-tests. The sample size was obtained by calculating the mean number of students enrolled at the high school. The mean, or average daily attendance, was obtained by calculating the mean number of students present for both the 2005/06 and 2007/08 school years. Researcher retrieved numbers, means, and standard deviation from central office personnel.

The attendance rate for freshman students of the majority race during the 2005/06 school year was 94 percent compared to the 93 percent attendance rate for freshman students of majority race during the 2007/08 school year. The average daily attendance for freshman students of the majority race in 2005/06 was 186 out of 197 while the

average daily membership for freshman students in the majority race in 2007/08 was 224 out of 241 enrolled students. Table 9 illustrates the numbers and means of the attendance rates for first time ninth-grade students of both the majority race and the minority races for both years in addition to the results of the t-tests. The t-test comparing majority race yielded a  $t = 57.99$ . The p-value was below the alpha of .01. Results of the t-test revealed a significant statistical difference between the students of the majority race in the 2005/06 freshman class when compared to students in the majority race in the 2007/08 freshman class.

**Table 9**

t-Test for Attendance Rates of First-Time Ninth-Grade Students by Year and Ethnicity

Ethnicity	n	M	SD	df	t	p
<b>Majority</b>						
2005/06	197	186	6.93	436	57.99	0.00
2007/08	241	224	7.06			
<b>Minority</b>						
2005/06	231	186	4.01	499	92.77	0.00
2007/08	270	224	5.00			
Majority: $t = 57.99, P = 0.00, df = 436$ Minority: $t = 92.77, P = 0.00, df = 499$						

The attendance rate for freshman students of minority races during the 2005/06 school year was 81 percent compared to the 83 percent attendance rate for freshman students of minority races during the 2007/08 school year. The average daily attendance for freshman students of the minority races in 2005/06 was 186 out of 231 while the

average daily membership for freshman students in the minority races in 2007/08 was 224 out of 270 enrolled students. As revealed in Table 9, the t-test yielded a  $t = 92.77$ . The p-value was below the alpha of .01. Results of the t-test revealed a significant statistical difference between students in minority races in the 2005/06 freshman class when compared to students of minority races in the 2007/08 freshman class.

### **Null Hypothesis 7**

There will be no statistically significant difference in the number of discipline referrals of first time 9<sup>th</sup> graders at a Middle Tennessee high school after the implementation of Freshman Academy as compared to before the implementation of Freshman Academy?

Hypothesis 7 was analyzed using a Chi-Square. Table 10 illustrates the total number and means of the numbers of discipline referrals for both years studied. The researcher received, from central office personnel, only the total numbers of discipline referrals, and the breakdown of discipline referral numbers by gender and ethnicity, for freshman students for both the 2005-06 and 2007-08 school years. Discipline referrals refer to any “discipline referral” slips turned in to administration asking for corrective action upon a student. Discipline referrals do not always result in discipline points or discipline action.

The table reveals that the Freshman Academy at the Middle Tennessee high school studied has a significant impact on the number of discipline referrals issued. In the 2005/06 school year, there were 428 total students enrolled in the freshman class. No Freshman Academy was established at this time. During this school year 219 freshman students received discipline referrals while 209 students did not. This reveals that 51 percent of freshman students were referred to administration for disciplinary action.

During the 2007/08 school year, there were 511 total students enrolled in the Freshman Academy. During this school year 171 freshman students received discipline referrals while 340 students did not. This reveals that 33 percent of freshman students were referred to administration for disciplinary action.

**Table 10**

Chi-Square for Discipline Referrals of First-time Ninth-Grade Students by Year

	No discipline		discipline		Total
	n	%	n	%	
2005-06	209	49%	219	51%	428
2007-08	340	67%	171	33%	511
Total	549		390		939

$$\chi^2 = 30, P = .00, df = 1$$

A Chi-Square analysis was completed on both years in question using a two by two contingency table. The results yielded a  $\chi^2 = 30$ , a  $df = 1$ , and a  $p$  value of .00. Research was conducted using a level of significance of .05. This data concluded, because the  $p$  value was below the alpha of .05, the percentage of Freshman Academy students referred for disciplinary action was statistically significant.

## Null Hypothesis 8

There will be no statistically significant difference in the number of discipline referrals of first time 9<sup>th</sup> graders at a Middle Tennessee high school after the implementation of Freshman Academy as compared to before the implementation of Freshman Academy in terms of gender?

Hypothesis 8 was analyzed using a Chi-Square. Tables 11 and 12 illustrate the total numbers and means of discipline referrals for males and females for both years studied. The researcher received, from central office personnel, only the total numbers of discipline referrals, and the breakdown of discipline referral numbers by gender and ethnicity, for freshman students for both the 2005-06 and 2007-08 school years.

The tables reveal that the Freshman Academy at the Middle Tennessee high school studied has a significant impact on the number of discipline referrals issued for both males and females. In the 2005/06 school year, there were 428 total students enrolled in the freshman class. The class consisted of 209 females and 219 males. No Freshman Academy was established at this time. During this school year 138 males were referred for discipline and 81 freshman females were referred for discipline. This reveals that 39 percent of female and 63 percent of male freshman students were referred to administration for disciplinary action. During the 2007/08 school year, there were 511 total students enrolled in the Freshman Academy. The class consisted of 238 females and 246 males. During this school year 108 male freshman students and 63 female freshman students received discipline referrals. This reveals that 25 percent of female and 41 percent of male freshman students were referred to administration for disciplinary action.

**Table 11**

Chi-Square for Discipline Referrals of First-time Female Ninth-Grade Students by Year

	No discipline referrals		discipline referrals		Total
	n	%	n	%	
2005/06	128	61%	81	39%	209
2007/08	186	75%	63	25%	249
Total	314		144		458

$$X^2 = 9.90, P = .0016, df = 1$$

A Chi-Square analysis was completed on both years in question for female freshman students using a two by two contingency table. The results for female freshman students yielded a  $X^2 = 9.90$ , a  $df = 1$ , and a  $p$  value of .0016. Research was conducted using a level of significance of .05. This data concluded, because the  $p$  value was below the alpha of .05, the percentage of female Freshman Academy students referred for disciplinary action was statistically significant.

A Chi-Square analysis was also completed on both years in questions for male freshman students using a two by two contingency table. The results for male freshman students yielded a  $X^2 = 21.93$ , a  $df = 1$ , and a  $p$  value of .000003. Research was conducted using a level of significance of .05. This data concluded, because the  $p$  value was below the alpha of .05, the percentage of female Freshman Academy students referred for disciplinary action was statistically significant.

**Table 12**

Chi-Square for Discipline Referrals of First-Time Male Ninth-Grade Students by Year

	No discipline referrals		discipline referrals		Total
	n	%	n	%	
2005/06	81	37%	138	63%	219
2007/08	154	59%	108	41%	262
Total	235		246		

$$\chi^2 = 21.93, P = .000003, df = 1$$

### Null Hypothesis 9

There will be no statistically significant difference in the number of discipline referrals of first time 9<sup>th</sup> graders at a Middle Tennessee high school after the implementation of Freshman Academy as compared to before the implementation of Freshman Academy in terms of ethnicity?

Hypothesis 9 was analyzed using a Chi-Square. Tables 13 and 14 illustrate the total number and means of discipline referrals for students of majority race and students of minority races for both years studied. The researcher received, from central office personnel, only the total numbers of discipline referrals, and the breakdown of discipline referral numbers by gender and ethnicity, for freshman students for both the 2005-06 and 2007-08 school years.

The tables reveal that the Freshman Academy at the Middle Tennessee high school studied has a significant impact on the number of discipline referrals issued for

students of both the majority race and minority races. In the 2005/06 school year, there were 428 total students enrolled in the freshman class. The class consisted of 197 students of the majority race and 231 students of minority races. No Freshman Academy was established at this time. During this school year 67 students of the majority race were referred for discipline and 152 freshman students of minority races were referred for discipline. This reveals that 34 percent of freshman students of the majority race and 66 percent of freshman students of minority races were referred to administration for disciplinary action. During the 2007/08 school year, there were 511 total students enrolled in the Freshman Academy. The class consisted of 241 of the majority race and 270 of minority races. During this school year 43 freshman students of the majority race and 128 freshman students of minority races received discipline referrals. This reveals that 18 percent of freshman students of the majority race and 47 percent of freshman students of minority races were referred to administration for disciplinary action.

A Chi-Square analysis was completed on both years in question for freshman students the majority race using a two by two contingency table. The results for these freshman students yielded a  $X^2 = 15.19$ , a  $df = 1$ , and a  $p$  value of .000097. Research was conducted using a level of significance of .05. This data concluded, because the  $p$  value was below the alpha of .05, the percentage of Freshman Academy students of the majority race referred for disciplinary action was statistically significant.

A Chi-Square analysis was also completed on both years in questions for freshman students of minority races using a two by two contingency table. The results for these freshman students yielded a  $X^2 = 16.53$ , a  $df = 1$ , and a  $p$  value of .000049. Research was conducted using a level of significance of .05. This data concluded,

because the *p* value was below the alpha of .05, the percentage of Freshman Academy students of minority races referred for disciplinary action was statistically significant.

**Table 13**

Chi-Square for Discipline Referrals of First-Time Majority Ninth-Grade Students by Year

	No Referrals		Referrals		Total
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
2005/06	130	66%	67	34%	197
2007/08	198	82%	43	18%	241
Total	328		110		

$$\chi^2 = 15.19, P = .000097, df = 1$$

**Table 14**

Chi-Square for Discipline Referrals of First-Time Minority Ninth-Grade Students by Year

	No Referrals		Referrals		Total
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
2005/06	79	34%	152	66%	231
2007/08	142	53%	128	47%	270
Total	221		280		

$$\chi^2 = 16.53, P = .000049, df = 1$$

## CHAPTER V

### Summary of Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

#### Summary

The dropout rate has become a great area of concern since the implementation of No Child Left Behind act of 2002. Tennessee alone, in the 2003-04 school year, graduated below 70 percent of its students in the required four years (Laird, et al. 2007). This concern has led to many districts researching programs with proven positive results. Creating a Freshman Academy by separating freshman students from the upper classmen and creating teams of teachers is one of these methods. According to Letgers and Kerr (2001) and Peasant (2006), the transition from middle school to high school is as equally important to the transition from elementary school to middle school. Guiding students through the transition to high school has been found to be effective in lowering the drop out rate.

The purpose of this study was to explore the effectiveness of Freshman Academy at a Middle Tennessee high school as an intervention program so leaders can determine if the resources being spent on the Freshman Academy in the county have positively impacted the areas of student achievement, attendance, and discipline as measured by attendance rates, numbers of discipline referrals, and numbers of students retained for male and female students of both the majority race and minority races enrolled in the program their first year of high school.

Though many studies have concluded that many factors can lead to a student choosing to drop out, such as low self-esteem, poor academic performance, and low expectations, many researchers agree that the problems escalate once a student reaches

the ninth grade. Wheelock and Maio (2005) called this the “bottle-neck” epidemic where students are commonly repeating the ninth grade. The size of the school has been found to make a difference in student success as well. Ayers, Bracey, and Smith (2000), conclude that larger schools are inferior to smaller schools. In fact, Gladden (1998) found that students who graduate from a small school are more likely to enter a university. “Successful small schools provide an educational environment where all students can achieve at high levels...” (p. 104). A longitudinal study conducted by Wasley and Lear (2001) found that small schools tend to have higher grade point averages and lower dropout rates. However, researchers of small schools agree that the socioeconomic make-up of the schools usually affect the results. The push for creating smaller schools is prevailing and more neighborhood schools are being built.

One method schools are using to avoid the cost of building new schools in order to create smaller learning environments is the creation of small learning communities. The method proved to be successful in Des Moines, Iowa. Creating the schools-within-a-school decreased the dropout rate and increased the attendance rate. Similar results were recorded in schools in Georgia and Texas as well.

Creating a Freshman Academy is a way to assist students in feeling more secure. Isolating freshman in a separate wing of the building, using teacher teams committed to helping students succeed, and using common classroom rules, expectations and consequences may help schools achieve more desired results. However, targeting students at risk of dropping out and offering them additional support, such as summer programs designed to prepare students for high school, were found most effective.

Letgers and Kerr (2001) found only a small improvement in schools with low levels of implementation.

This study was conducted using freshman students from a Middle Tennessee high school. The school, at the time of the study, largely exceeded a student population of 1,500. Many students were children of at least one active military parent and, being a school bordering an army base, there is a high mobility rate during the school year, meaning that students enroll and withdrawal more often than in most other schools. According to central office personnel, there is a 30 percent mobility rate at the high school studied. The comparative study used a freshman class before the implementation of Freshman Academy and a freshman class the year after the Freshman Academy was established. The study attempted to prove whether or not a Freshman Academy had an impact on one Middle Tennessee high school's graduation rate, attendance rate, and/or the number of discipline referrals submitted. The years studied included the 2005/06 school year, the last year before Freshman Academy was implemented, and 2007/08, the second year of Freshman Academy. Educators and county officials will be able to use data from this study to determine if a Freshman Academy has had a positive effect on freshman students.

The population used for the study included 428 freshman students during the 2005/06 school year and 511 Freshman Academy students during the 2007/08 school year. Differences between the two populations were tested using the unpaired t-test and Chi-Square Test. The two groups were compared according to variables including retention and promotion rates, attendance rates, and number of discipline referrals. These variables were based on gender and ethnicity.

The study shows that there were statistically significant differences between the students who participated in Freshman Academy and the students who attended the traditional freshman class before Freshman Academy was implemented in the areas of attendance and discipline. The students who participated in the Freshman Academy received fewer discipline referrals than students, in the same school, two years earlier who attended a traditional freshman class. This is especially significant given that there was an increase of almost 100 students during the 2007/08 school year. There was a total decrease of 18 percent in the number of discipline referrals after the implementation of Freshman Academy. The difference in the number of discipline referrals was largest for male freshman students. The Middle Tennessee high school saw a 22 percent decrease in the number of discipline referrals for male freshman students. There was a 19 percent decrease in the number of discipline referrals for students of the minority race, and the Middle Tennessee high school saw a 16 percent decrease in the number of discipline referrals for students in the majority race. Female freshman students after the implementation of Freshman Academy received 14 percent fewer discipline referrals than students before Freshman Academy was established. Though these numbers seem significant, in addition to the implementation of Freshman Academy, there was also a change in administration between these two years. The philosophies in handling discipline were extremely different between 2005/06 and 2007/08.

Similarly, a study of a school district, conducted by Chmelynki (2004) in Georgia reported a 55 percent decrease in the number of discipline referrals for freshman students after implementing a Freshman Academy. In another study, by the same source, using schools in Tennessee and Pennsylvania, similar results were found. Both schools

reported a decrease in discipline problems. Kelley (2010) also reports that there was a significant difference in the number of discipline referrals after the implementation of a Freshman Academy. All statistically significant findings in these studies mentioned were positive. All three studies, similarly to the current study, showed that Freshman Academies are having a positive impact on discipline. In contrast, Hendrix (2007) comparing two Tennessee schools, found no statistically significant differences in discipline referrals for females, minority students, or students of the majority race, but did find that Freshman Academy had a positive impact on males regarding discipline.

The statistical significance in the attendance rates is much more difficult to explain. There was a 95 percent attendance rate for freshman students in 2005/06 before the implementation of Freshman Academy and there was a 95 percent attendance rate after the implementation of Freshman Academy. Therefore, it appears that Freshman Academy had no impact on attendance. The t-tests, however, using the numbers, means, and standard deviations received from central office personnel, show an extreme significant difference. The t-test performed comparing the average number of students enrolled during the year to the average number of students present on any given day revealed a  $t$  value of 37.30. A  $p$  value of 0.00 was found for all t-tests run on attendance. The t-test results,  $t$  value of 92.77, for the minority students was most significant. These results are extremely high. These results are followed by the impact of Freshman Academy on female students. A t-test revealed a  $t=76.64$ . The t-test performed on male students revealed a  $t$  value of 75.59. The  $t$  value for students of the majority race was the least significant at 57.99. One must consider the 30 percent mobility rate that has been calculated by central office for this school, however, when considering these results.

There was also approximately an addition of 100 students from the year before Freshman Academy and the year after implementation.

In contrast to the current study, Hendrix (2007), in a study also using Middle Tennessee schools, found a significant difference in attendance rates for females but no statistically significant difference in attendance rates for male freshman students or freshman students of either the majority or minority races. For females, the Freshman Academy was shown to have a negative effect. Kimball (2007) found no difference in attendance rates in a study conducted using a North Carolina school as well. And a study conducted by Kelley (2010) also found no statistically significant difference of attendance rates when comparing schools with Freshman Academy to schools with traditional freshman classes.

There were no statistically significant differences found in the promotion or retention rates of freshman students before in the traditional freshman class and those students who participated in Freshman Academy. In fact, the promotion rates are almost identical from one class to the next. Overall, there was a one percent increase in the retention rate after the implementation of Freshman Academy when comparing it to the year before implementation, but again, there was an increase of almost 100 students. Results of the Chi-Square test revealed Freshman Academy had no impact on males or females in terms of promotion or retention. Although the Chi-Square revealed no statistical difference for students of both the majority race and minority races, there was a two percent decrease in retention rates from the students who participated in the traditional freshman class compared to Freshman Academy students.

These results are not supported by research. A study conducted by Letgers and Kerr (2001) revealed an increase in promotion rates, even in schools with low levels of Freshman Academy implementation. Similar results were found by Chmelynski (2004) who found a 46 percent decrease in retention after freshman Academy was established in schools in Georgia. A study conducted by the United States department of Education using ten schools that used a high level of Freshman Academy implementation showed an increase in promotion rates. A study by Kimball (2007) revealed that the promotion rates for a school in North Carolina were statistically significant for minority students but not statistically significant overall or for students of the majority race, males or females.

## **Conclusions**

The results of this study are surprising in the area of promotion and retention rates but not in the areas of attendance and discipline. As a teacher in the building the years used in the study, more positive results were expected in the area of promotion and retention rates. Though there were mixed emotions concerning the new administrator, morale seemed to be high regarding the new Freshman Academy program. A Good to Great team had been organized to research and study successful Freshman Academy programs in the nation, and several key personnel visited schools in the nation that had seen positive results. The Freshman Academy was replicated using these programs. Teachers were separated into teams and students were placed into a team of teachers. A summer bridges program had been developed and all students that had been targeted as being at risk for dropping out were required to attend. This program was designed to get students caught up so that they could be expected to succeed in the ninth grade. In addition, Freshman Academy students and parents attended the first half day of school.

After a presentation by the administrator and the distribution of student schedules, parents accompanied their students from class to class. This helped students learn their way around the building and gave both parents and students an opportunity to meet teachers. All Freshman Academy teachers were instructed to hand out a syllabus and to discuss classroom expectations. The teachers had established a common set of classroom rules and consequences. During the year, students who had participated in the bridges program were also partnered with a junior or senior peer mentor. The mentor was responsible for coaching the student and checking the use of binders, agendas, using the mentee's schedule to design appropriate times to use the restroom and visit their lockers between classes, and to monitor mentee academic progress. In addition, during advisory times, teachers taught lessons on how to organize a binder, how to use an agenda, and test taking skills. In addition, students participated in team building activities to create positive relationships with peers and teachers.

The impact of Freshman Academy on the promotion and retention rates on the Middle Tennessee high school studied was disappointing, but this particular high school had a promotion rate of 95 percent. This number is difficult to improve on. Moreover, there was an increase of almost 100 students from the first year studied to the second year and there was a two percent decrease in the number of students retained. The school had the highest graduation rate and lowest dropout rate in the county, even before the implementation of Freshman Academy. Also, the school zone had been rezoned between the two years studied, and this could have had an impact on the results.

The attendance rates indicated an extreme statistical significance. This was surprising since the attendance rate was 95 percent for both years. However, again, there

were almost 100 new students the second year after the implementation of Freshman Academy. This increase in student enrollment could account for the significance. Still the  $p$  value of 0.00 was surprising with almost identical percentiles. An extreme statistical significance was revealed when testing for attendance in terms of gender and ethnicity as well. Minority students in Freshman Academy were affected the most and the academy had the least affect on students of the majority race. The impact on females and males were approximately equal.

Implementing Freshman Academy, especially at a high level, also had a great impact on discipline. This impact was more visible by viewing percentages. The impact of Freshman Academy on male students was most apparent with a 22 percent decrease in the number of discipline referrals. A change in administrative style could have greatly impacted these results. The administrator during the 2005/06 year, before the implementation of Freshman Academy, was more aggressive with disciplinary action. Students disrupting the learning environment were unacceptable and students would be removed from the classroom. The administrator during the 2007/08 year, after Freshman Academy was implemented, was focused more on teacher's handling discipline within the classroom in order to keep students in the classroom as much as possible. The design of the Freshman Academy also played a role in reducing the number of discipline referrals by creating more secure learning environment. This allowed students to feel engaged, giving them less of a reason to cause classroom disruptions.

## **Recommendations**

This study was conducted to determine if the Freshman Academy implemented at a Middle Tennessee high school has impacted discipline, attendance, and/or promotion

and retention rates by comparing a traditional freshman class to a Freshman Academy class the year after the program was implemented. Based on the conclusions of this study, the following recommendations for practice and research are offered.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

It is recommended that the school system in Tennessee explore the feasibility of implementing Freshman Academy. Implementation should be based on current findings. These academies should include elements such as summer programs to help students with the transition, peer mentors, teaming teachers, and isolating the academy from the rest of the student body. A summer program should target students who are at risk of dropping out or who are likely to perform poorly academically. Peer mentors should be introduced during this time and should be an upperclassman assigned to one particular at risk freshman student. Designated times, perhaps during a homeroom or advisory time should be used for peer partners to meet. Peer mentors should be used to check and encourage academic progress, organization, and study skills. Creating teams of teachers has been proven to improve the relationships between students and teachers. This also helps teachers communicate about successful ways to handle individual student issues. Adding these programs has been proven to increase the success rate of the Freshman Academy.

Teachers should be placed on Freshman Academy teams by volunteering only. Research suggests that teachers have a more positive attitude about Freshman Academies when they volunteer to serve on the team. Also, Freshman Academy teacher teams should be given autonomy to make decisions affecting the program. This will also improve teacher morale.

Advisory times should be used for teaching study skills, organization skills, college or career research, and any other topic that could aide students in become more academic minded and focused on their futures. Advisory teachers need to establish a good relationship with students so that students feel comfortable approaching their advisor about troublesome issues.

Meetings should be held in the spring of students' eighth grade years and during the summer prior to the ninth grade in order to introduce parents and students to the building, rules and consequences, and expectations. Parents and students should also be introduced to all programs, clubs, and sports offered at the high school to encourage students to become plugged in. Students who are involved in the school are less likely to drop out. In addition, the first day of school, typically a half day, parents should be invited to attend school with their students. Schedules for this day should be organized so that parents and students are able to meet with each teacher. Getting parents involved is an important element in a student's success.

A credit recovery program should be used to help students earn any credits they are lacking as early as the beginning of the second semester of ninth grade. This will enable students to stay on track and not fall behind. Students failing any class after the first nine weeks should be targeted and encouraged to attend special after school tutoring sessions offered by teachers and/or students. Also teachers should be offered professional development in intervention strategies to assist students that are falling behind in classes. These strategies should be taught as in classroom, during class methods.

## **Recommendations for Further Research**

As this study was conducted in a school with a high mobility rate, it is recommended that the study be replicated in more schools with lower mobility. In addition, studies should be conducted with schools using different levels of implementation. Much research conducted does not state what measures schools studied have taken in their implementations of Freshman Academy.

Since this study used data from three years ago, and another change in administration has occurred at the school studied, new research should be conducted using more updated data to show longitudinal effects in areas such as promotion and retention rates, number of submitted discipline referrals, and attendance rates. This research should include all new programs implemented as part of Freshman Academy in order to show the level of implementation. In addition, studies should be conducted in this county showing the effectiveness of Freshman Academy on ELL and special education students.

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## APPENDICES

## **APPENDIX A**

Clarksville-Montgomery County Schools

Letter of Approval to Conduct Research



Sallie Armstrong, Ed.D.  
Curriculum & Instruction Director

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Board of Education      621 Gracey Avenue      Clarksville, Tennessee 37040  
931-920-7819      Fax: 931-920-9819      email: sallie.armstrong@cmcss.net

November 21, 2008

Dear Ms. Woods,

The Research Committee Approved your request to conduct research in the effectiveness of Freshman Academy at Northeast High School. You may now contact the principal for further permission.

Yours,

*Sallie Armstrong*

Sallie Armstrong, Ed. D.  
Director of Curriculum and Instruction

## **APPENDIX B**

Austin Peay State University Institutional Review Board  
Letter of Approval to Conduct Research with Modifications

Mar. 3, 2009

Sherrie Marie Woods  
1502 Autumn Drive  
Clarksville, TN 37042

RE: Your application regarding study number 09-008 Examining the Effectiveness of Freshman Academy at Northeast High School in Clarksville-Montgomery County

Dear Ms. Woods,

Thank you for your application for the study above. The Austin Peay IRB has reviewed your application and has approved it pending the following clarification:

- Please list the specific variables that will be provided to the researcher by the Clarksville Montgomery County School System.

Once you have provided this information, you are free to conduct your study. Your study is subject to continuing review on or before Mar. 3, 2010, unless closed before that date. Enclosed please find the forms to report when your study has been completed and the form to request an annual review of a continuing study. Please submit the appropriate form prior to Mar. 3, 2010.

Please note that any changes to the study as approved must be promptly reported and approved. Some changes may be approved by expedited review; others require full board review. If you have any questions or require further information, contact me at (221-7231; fax 221-6267; email [grahc@apsu.edu](mailto:grahc@apsu.edu)).

Again, thank you for your cooperation with the APSU IRB and the human research review process. Best wishes for a successful study!

Sincerely,

Charles R. Grah  
Chair, Austin Peay Institutional Review Board

Cc: Gary Stewart, School of Education

## **APPENDIX C**

Austin Peay State University Institutional Review Board

Letter of Approval to Conduct Research

April 13, 2010

Sherrie Marie Woods  
1502 Autumn Drive  
Clarksville, TN 37042

RE: Your application regarding study number 10-010 Examining the effectiveness of Freshman Academy at Northeast High School in Clarksville-Montgomery County.

Dear Ms. Woods,

Thank you for your application for the study above. The Austin Peay IRB has reviewed your application and has approved your study without further modification. Congratulations!

You are granted permission to conduct your study as described in your application effective immediately. The study is subject to continuing review on or before April 13, 2011, unless closed before that date. Enclosed please find the forms to report when your study has been completed and the form to request an annual review of a continuing study. Please submit the appropriate form prior to April 13, 2011.

Please note that any changes to the study as approved must be promptly reported and approved. Some changes may be approved by expedited review; others require full board review. If you have any questions or require further information, contact me at (221-7231; fax 221-6267; email [grahc@apsu.edu](mailto:grahc@apsu.edu)).

Again, thank you for your cooperation with the APSU IRB and the human research review process. Best wishes for a successful study!

Sincerely,

Charles R. Grah  
Chair, Austin Peay Institutional Review Board

cc: Gary Stewart, College of Education

## **APPENDIX D**

Letter to the Austin Peay State University Institutional Review Board  
Requesting an Extension and Modifications to the Study and Title

Stewart, Gary

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From: Stewart, Gary  
Sent: Thursday, March 10, 2011 8:57 PM  
To: Grah, Charles  
Cc: Stewart, Gary

Dr. Grah:

On behalf of Mrs. Sherrie Woods, I am requesting an extension for her IRB approval # 10-010 for her Field Study entitled, "Examining The Effectiveness of Freshman Academy at Northeast High School in Clarksville-Montgomery County. Additionally, we are also requesting the title be changed to omit the name of the high school and reference to the school system. The title we are requesting approval for this Field Study is, "Examining the Effectiveness of Freshman Academy at a Middle Tennessee High School".

*Dr. Gary Stewart*, Associate Professor

Educational Leadership Studies

Graduate Coordinator

College of Education

Austin Peay State University

931-221-6782

[stewartg@apsu.edu](mailto:stewartg@apsu.edu)

## **APPENDIX E**

Austin Peay State University Institutional Review Board

Letter of Approval for Extension and Modifications to the Study and Title

**Stewart, Gary**

**From:** Grah, Charles  
**Sent:** Monday, March 14, 2011 3:05 PM  
**To:** Stewart, Gary  
**Cc:** Williams, Katie E; Institutional Review Board  
**Subject:** RE:

I approve the requested changes and extension to IRB #10-010. This extension is good for one year from today's date (Mar. 14, 2011). Should the project be completed before that date, please submit a "Closed Study Report". If collection of data will extend beyond that date, please file a "Request for Annual Review" by the Mar. 14 anniversary.

Sincerely,  
Buddy Grah, Chair  
Austin Peay IRB

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**From:** Stewart, Gary  
**Sent:** Thursday, March 10, 2011 8:57 PM  
**To:** Grah, Charles  
**Cc:** Stewart, Gary  
**Subject:**

Dr. Grah:  
**On behalf of Mrs. Sherrie Woods, I am requesting an extension for her IRB approval # 10-010 for her Field Study entitled, "Examining The Effectiveness of Freshman Academy at Northeast High School in Clarksville-Montgomery County. Additionally, we are also requesting the title be changed to omit the name of the high school and reference to the school system. The title we are requesting approval for this Field Study is, "Examining the Effectiveness of Freshman Academy at a Middle Tennessee High School".**

*Dr. Gary Stewart*, Associate Professor  
Educational Leadership Studies  
Graduate Coordinator  
College of Education  
Austin Peay State University  
931-221-6782  
[stewartg@apsu.edu](mailto:stewartg@apsu.edu)